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ARMED SELF-DEFENSE

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LECTURE I. RESISTING RACIST VIOLENCE

I have asserted the right of Negroes to meet the violence of the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense—and have acted on it.

—Robert F. Williams¹

INTRODUCTION

The American South was spoiled by incalculable cases of racist violence before and during the Civil Rights era. Armed white supremacists were often the culprits. And their violence was often on full display when black citizens were engaged in peaceful struggles for social, political, civil, and economic rights. They were frequent targets of threats of bodily violence. And, sadly, these threats were routinely acted upon causing community chaos and countless casualties. An essential aspect of many of these cases is that the targets of racist violence appealed to local, state, and even federal law enforcement authorities for protection but rarely received it. And when they did get help, it was usually too little, or too late, to mitigate their lamentable losses and senseless suffering.

How should citizens living in a racially unjust society respond when government fails to protect them from racist violence? They can pray and hope for the best. They can protest or riot. They can engage in civil, or even, uncivil disobedience. Or, as representatives of the black tradition of arms such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X and others have urged, they can also opt for armed self-defense (ASD). I am generally interested in this response to racist violence, and in a particular argument for it within black political thought. And I will pursue these interrelated interests in my three lectures.²

Of course, the foregoing responses to racist violence are not exclusive. One can do all of these things – pray, protest, and disobey – or some combination of them and take other actions as well. Moreover, one might also believe that organizing victims of racial injustice to engage in prayer vigils, peaceful protests, and nonviolent civil disobedience has a greater chance of success when supported by

I am grateful to audiences at Toronto Metropolitan University and Vanderbilt University for fruitful feedback on drafts of this material.

¹ Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns*, ed., Marc Schleifer (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 39.

² Lecture II: A Right to Resist, and Lecture III: Resistance and Survival.

those willing to take up arms with the hope of deterring racist violence.³ Such a view takes armed self-defense to be instrumental for resisting racist violence, and for securing racial justice within an imperfect democracy. And, lastly, one may endorse armed self-defense without also affirming the value of violence for its own sake, or for retribution, and without denying the desirability of nonviolent responses to social evils.⁴

Thinking through the taking up of arms – specifically guns – raises numerous questions: How should we understand armed self-defense and the right to it? When is it necessary? When is it justified? What duties constrain the behavior of persons bearing arms for self-defense? How does the United States Supreme Court view it? And what implications does this view have for policing? These lectures address the first three questions via a critical engagement with Robert F. Williams's argument for armed self-defense, in his 1962 book *Negroes with Guns*.

My overarching objectives are to display, develop, and defend his argument. And much of this will involve sympathetic reconstruction, plugging gaps, and addressing potential objections. The principal aims of this first lecture are threefold: (1) to define armed self-defense in a way that coheres with Williams's main argument for it, (2) to identify his response to the question of whether armed self-defense is the answer to racist violence, and (3) to amplify his view that ASD can be a form of dignified resistance.

There is a modest philosophical literature on gun rights and gun control that explores defenses as well as objections to persons bearing arms for self-defense. And there is an even more substantial body of legal theory and legal history scholarship. A novel aspect of my philosophical treatment of this topic is that it takes up the case for armed self-defense by attending primarily to the thought of black Americans who asserted their right to bear arms while living with the very real and omnipresent threat of racist violence. Throughout these lectures – with such cases shaping the analysis – I will reference some of the existing philosophical and legal writings on gun rights and gun control including relevant case law to the extent that it helps expound or evaluate the ideas and arguments advanced by Williams and other black thinkers. Readers looking for a point-by-point engagement with more mainstream sources, or merely for summaries of them, must look elsewhere. And these remarks also apply to the extensive philosophical scholarship on self-defense.

³ Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁴ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 213.

PREVIEWING WILLIAMS'S SURVIVAL ARGUMENT

Robert Williams was not conducting a philosophical thought experiment, and asking critics of armed self-defense to participate, when he urged them to consider “violent racism” or violent racists assaulting *their* person, *their* homes, and *their* families.⁵ He and many other black people in the South were experiencing this violence all too often. And Williams knew that the critics knew this. So, in stark terms, he was imploring the critics – including most notably Martin Luther King, Jr. who was, of course, intimately familiar with the brutality of Southern racism – to be more sincere about how *they* would respond when facing the same violence and, of equal importance, when unable to count on the protection of government or law enforcement authorities. From Williams’s point of view, the critics of armed self-defense must be disingenuous because it was self-evident that anyone in similar circumstances had a right to armed self-defense to protect themselves, their family, and property.

But since this may not be self-evident to everyone we must nevertheless reflect upon the nature of this right to armed self-defense and its justification. And taking up the question of “survival,” as Williams puts it, and when survival is at stake is crucial to both tasks. In its most concise formulation, on my reading, Williams’s main justification for armed self-defense, referred to henceforth as the *Survival Argument*, comes to this:

1. Armed self-defense is justified when it is necessary.
2. Armed self-defense is necessary when survival is at stake.
3. Armed self-defense is justified when survival is at stake.

I am especially interested in unpacking and assessing his defense of the second premise but this must await my third lecture. In the meantime, the first steps toward this goal, to be taken in the present lecture, are to consider a definition of ASD that makes its connection with violence explicit, and then to consider the precise scope of Williams’s commitment to violence when faced with nonideal circumstances. I will do the former in the next section by attending to his philosophical agreements with Malcolm X, and the latter in the section after that by attending to his

⁵ Williams, *Negroes With Guns*, 121. Williams directed this remark primarily to black civil rights leaders, the black elite, and others who denounced black people using firearms for self-defense.

disagreements with King.⁶ But before getting to these tasks, let me make some brief, and preliminary, observations to contextualize the turn to defensive violence in black political thought and action.

Black political thinkers do not see eye-to-eye on how black people should respond to violent racism. However, with the possible exceptions of unwavering pacifists, those staunchly committed to nonviolence as a matter of principle, or for weighty nonmoral reasons, many of these thinkers would probably acknowledge that, at times, self-defense, which harms or threatens to physically harm would-be attackers, is in order. Moreover, many of these thinkers (including ones in the first group) would likely affirm that armed self-defense – a type of violent resistance – is inevitable when the evil of violent racism simply becomes too much for black people to bear.

A particularly horrific spell of racial violence in United States history occurred during the “Red Summer” of 1919 in the postwar period.⁷ Among the factors that historians have cited for the racial violence that overtook the country after World War I, especially in the South and in Northern cities, was racial economic competition fueled by mass black migration in search of better employment opportunities in industrial centers, calls for greater social equality between whites and blacks, which was perceived as a threat to America’s enduring white supremacist social order, as well as a brutal lynching and racial intimidation campaign against blacks that rarely resulted in justice and that was often facilitated by law enforcement inaction or, in some cases, conscious cooperation.⁸

For instance, in Illinois cities such as East St. Louis and Chicago, where black people lost trust in the state’s ability to provide protection, this insecurity made them more inclined to pursue armed self-defense.⁹ In the aftermath of the 1919 Chicago race riots, W. E. B. Du Bois poignantly captured widely shared sentiments about the necessity and inevitability of armed self-defense in a *Crisis* magazine editorial:

For three centuries we have suffered and cowered. No race ever gave
Passive Resistance and Submission to Evil longer, more piteous trial.
Today we raise the terrible weapon of Self-Defense. When the murderer
comes, he shall not longer strike us in the back. When the armed

⁶ Considering King’s skepticism about ASD will also provide an opportunity to highlight the philosophical orthodoxy that necessity is a requirement of justified self-defense. Williams takes this for granted with the first premise of his argument.

⁷ Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011).

⁸ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), see especially Chapters 1 and 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

lynchers gather, we too must gather armed. When the mob moves, we propose to meet it with bricks and clubs and guns.¹⁰

And years later, when blacks were on the front lines of the national struggle for freedom, jobs, and equal enjoyment and protection of civil and human rights, Malcolm X came to a similar conclusion while stressing the state's inability and unwillingness to protect them from racist violence as they peacefully pursued their rights and freedoms.¹¹ Of course, blacks also experienced racist violence before migrating North. And there is evidence that particular features of local environments in Southern states, such as racial relations of economic dependency, the personalities of black political leaders, and intra-racial class politics contributed to whether ASD emerged as a significant option in response to the scourge of racist violence in different black communities.¹²

In calling for armed self-defense, under certain circumstances, Du Bois and Malcolm were emphasizing the need for flexibility in the freedom struggle. And Williams makes this point too. Indeed, he cites it as the essential point of disagreement between himself and King. "My only difference with Dr. King," says Williams, "is that I believe in flexibility in the freedom struggle. This means that I believe in non-violent tactics where feasible..."¹³ The tactics that King preferred, according to Williams, were not always feasible. And when nonviolence was not feasible, Williams and Malcolm X agreed that it was imperative to "speak another language," namely, the language of armed self-defense.

WHAT IS ARMED SELF-DEFENSE?

Taking the podium after Fannie Lou Hamer (another proponent of black armed self-defense), at a 1964 Harlem rally for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party campaign, Malcolm X remarked that Hamer's white persecutors – devoid of a sense of morality and respect for law – spoke "the language of brutality," and he argued that communication with them required using a language they understood. "If his language is with a shotgun, get a shotgun," says Malcolm, "Yes, I said if he only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle. If he only understands the language

¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Let Us Reason Together," *The Crisis* 18 (September 1919): 231.

¹¹ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Brietman (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

¹² Annelieke Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960-1965," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1 (2007): 71-98.

¹³ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 40.

of a rope, get a rope. But don't waste time talking the wrong language to a man if you want to really communicate with him."¹⁴

Two years earlier, speaking after the acquittal of a white man who attempted to rape a pregnant black woman, accompanied by her six-year old son who helped her escape, Williams, expressing the collective outrage of a community denied justice, had this to say: "This demonstration today shows that the Negro in the South cannot expect justice in the courts. He must convict his attackers on the spot. He must meet violence with violence, lynching with lynching."¹⁵

This way of putting things, namely as an imperative to speak the language of violence, is ambiguous and subject to misunderstanding. Is it a call for defensive or offensive violence? It might easily be interpreted as a call beseeching blacks to take up weapons offensively either to retaliate for unavenged racial wrongs or to inflict violence to preempt such wrongs. At times, Williams and Malcolm X seem to invite, or at least not be especially troubled by, this interpretation. However, at other times, both appear somewhat more circumspect.

In the aftermath of hysteria created by the press after his remarks, Williams offered this clarification: "These court decisions open the way to violence. I do not mean that Negroes should go out and attempt to get revenge for mistreatments or injustices..." Instead "I spoke of self-defense," said Williams, "when the courts failed to protect us."¹⁶ Malcolm X, with a bit more sarcasm, had this to say in one of his most famous speeches, after calling attention to the constitutional right of black people to own firearms: "This doesn't mean you're going to get a rifle and form battalions and go out looking for white folks, although you'd be within your rights — I mean, you'd be justified; but that would be illegal and we don't do anything illegal."¹⁷ Below I will attend to a concern raised by King about the very thin line between defensive and offensive. This concern targets these more measured calls for defensive violence against racist violence.

The general point being made by Williams and Malcolm X is that blacks, when faced with racist violence by armed whites, should be prepared to meet aggressive violence with protective violence and they should do so with equal force. It would be good to have some conceptual clarification before settling on an understanding of armed self-defense that coheres with Williams's survival argument. And we can start by distinguishing different types of armed resistance to aggressive racist violence.

¹⁴ Malcolm X, "With Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, 108.

¹⁵ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," 43.

Akinyele Omowale Umoja defines armed resistance as “individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or other goals of insurgent political action and in defense of human rights.”¹⁸ And he rightly points out that guns are but one instrument of force. “Fists, feet, stones, bricks, blades, and gasoline firebombs, as Umoja notes, “may all be employed to defend, protect, or protest.”¹⁹ This definition is a good start. But it would be more constructive to simplify things a bit. We can define *armed resistance*, more generally, as *using an instrument of force for a specific goal*.

Here we are specifically concerned with firearms. But it is clear that Malcolm X and Williams presume that we are justified in using at least equal force when the goal is defense of self or others. Malcolm X makes this point by stressing the importance of speaking the right language. And it seems, moreover, that they both allow for, and should allow for, a rather broad understanding of what counts as “use;” this can include simply bearing or brandishing a gun to achieve the goal in question. So, for instance, letting a would-be racist attacker know that one is armed and prepared to shoot should count as a case of armed resistance.²⁰ When white lynch mobs took to the streets of Atlanta in 1906, W. E. B. Du Bois, rushing home to defend his family, purchased a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and buckshot ammo, and later said: “If a white mob had stepped on the campus where I lived I would without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass.”²¹ Had he made it known that this was his intention, say by standing guard of his home with the gun in view, this would count as armed resistance.

However, as it stands, the foregoing definition is wanting. A knife is an instrument of force but using one to butter bread is clearly not an instance of armed resistance. Likewise, using the butt of a gun to hammer a nail does not count as armed resistance. Clearly, these are not the kind of specific goals referenced in this definition. One way to pin this down is to consider a way of distinguishing different types of armed resistance. Umoja does so, in part, by attending to how we specify the goals. He offers an illuminating taxonomy that situates armed self-defense as one of several types of resistance and included among them are retaliatory violence, spontaneous rebellion, guerilla warfare, armed vigilance/enforcement, and armed

¹⁸ Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ Some studies of defensive gun use incidents, measuring what the defender did with the gun, consider whether they simply showed the gun to a would be assailant. See, for example, Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz, “Armed Resistance to Crime: The Prevalence and Nature of Self-Defense with a Gun,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 86 (1995): 150-187.

²¹ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 211.

struggle.²² Each type of resistance can be utilized in response to actual or prospective racist violence of which Williams gives ample instances in *Negroes with Guns*. And each type of resistance, insofar as it utilizes an instrument of force, can be viewed as an instance of violence. Broadly speaking, these types of resistance fall into three categories: *protective* (using force to protect); *retaliatory* (using force to retaliate), and *preemptive* (using force to prevent).

Umoja situates armed self-defense in the first category by defining it as “the protection of life, persons, and property from aggressive assault through the application of force necessary to thwart or neutralize attack.”²³ Note that this last clause raises and links the issues of necessity and proportionality. We may, of course, judge a particular use of force to protect persons from aggressive assault as morally unjustified if it is excessive or unnecessary. And this judgment pertains to the ethics of self-defense. However, as some philosophers have urged, we need not integrate our position on matters of normative appraisal into our conceptual definition of armed self-defense.

When we ask, “What is armed self-defense?,” we can either be concerned with morally justifying the use of instruments of force to resist an aggressive assault or with conceptually elucidating what constitutes armed self-defense.²⁴ Of course we can also be concerned with both. Our interest in the former task leads us to ponder the conditions that must be met to morally excuse (or allow) what is otherwise morally unjustified conduct. And Williams is centrally concerned with this task. Here we find philosophers identifying and defending factors such as success, proportionality, and necessity as moral constraints on self-defense.²⁵ Williams’s survival argument focuses on *necessity*, and on spelling out the circumstances in which it becomes necessary for black people to take up arms against racist violence. And, as for our interest in the latter (conceptual) task, here some philosophers might say that this is a prior question, concerning the nature of self-defense, which should be answered, in part, by considering fidelity to ordinary language, legal usage, and to values such as simplicity and fertility.²⁶

Williams is not interested in this conceptual task, however. And I have not found any evidence of him offering an explicit definition of armed self-defense. Yet he

²² Ibid., 7-8.

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ Samuel C. Rickless, “The Nature of Self-Defense,” *San Diego Law Review* 55 (2018): 339-356. I adapt this analysis to the case of armed self-defense.

²⁵ Daniel Statman, “On the Success Condition for Legitimate Self-Defense,” *Ethics* 118 (2008): 659-686; Suzanne Uniacke, “Proportionality and Self-Defense,” *Law and Philosophy* 30 (2011): 253-272; and Seth Lazar, “Necessity in Self-Defense and War,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 40 (2012): 3-44.

²⁶ Uwe Steinhoff, “What is Self Defense?,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 29 (2015): 385-402.

does describe numerous cases of ASD from which we can infer what he might have said about this matter if asked. Many of the cases involve actual or prospective instances of racist violence stemming from an angry white mob.

ANGRY MOB: Somebody in the crowd fired a pistol and the people again started to scream hysterically. “Kill the niggers! Kill the niggers! Pour gasoline on the niggers!” The mob started to throw stones on top of my car. So I opened the door of the car and I put one foot on the ground and stood up in the door holding an Italian carbine.²⁷

In some of these cases, the danger posed by an angry mob is heightened by the role that the police play in efforts to disarm black people so that they are easier targets for the mob.

DISARM: [A policeman] ran straight to me and he grabbed me on the shoulder and said, “Surrender your weapon! Surrender your weapon!” I struck him in the face and knocked him back away from the car and put my carbine in his face and I told him that we didn’t intend to be lynched.²⁸

Furthermore, in lots of cases, when black people organize amongst themselves to collectively take up arms, they are doing so to defend themselves and their community from an angry mob.

DEFEND: Just at the beginning of darkness, white people started driving through our community, and they were shouting and screaming and some would fire out of their cars and throw objects at people on the streets. Many of the colored people started arming, exchanging guns and borrowing ammunition and forming guards for the night to defend the community from the mob massing in town.²⁹

And, lastly, in many of the cases described by Williams, black people who are threatened by angry white mobs, often aided by police action or inaction, are defending their persons, family, property, and community as vital interests germane to their survival.³⁰

²⁷ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 46.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 84.

³⁰ I shall have much more to say about this matter in upcoming lectures.

SURVIVAL: When violent racism and fascism strike at their families and their homes, not in a token way but in an all-out bloody campaign, then they will be among the first to advocate self-defense. They will justify their position as a question of survival.³¹

Williams's cases of racist violence provide elements that can be used to advance a definition of armed self-defense on his behalf – one that abides by the constraint of separating the normative and conceptual tasks. Assuming that individuals have a vital interest in survival, and that protecting self, others, and property (somewhat more controversially) advances this interest, we can define *armed self-defense*, more generally, as *using an instrument of force to defend a vital interest in survival that is threatened by another person or persons*. This relatively lean definition gels nicely with Williams's survival argument for armed self-defense. And it departs from Umoja's definition in a few notable respects.

Umoja adds a “force necessary to thwart or neutralize” an attack clause to his definition. But this goes against keeping matters of normative justification separate from conceptualizing what counts as armed self-defense.³² The question of how much force to use is, of course, an important yet complicated matter that speaks to the issue of proportionately. Philosophers can debate how much force is necessary for this purpose. And on this issue, as I noted earlier, Williams thinks that blacks are justified in using force at least equal to that posed by those who threaten their vital interest in survival. However, it is not inconceivable that Williams might allow for using greater force, say a 12 gauge shotgun instead of a .22 caliber pistol, or mortally wounding rather than inflicting a non-fatal injury on an attacker, particularly in cases where the interest in survival under threat is especially strong. For instance, if one thinks that the survival interest related to one's life is stronger or more stringent than the one related to one's home, and that threatening the former renders an aggressor more liable to a degree of force greater than the force they use, then this conclusion follows.³³

³¹ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 121.

³² Rickless raises this criticism against Steinhoff with this remark: “But Steinhoff treats the disjunctive *imminent-or-ongoing attack* requirement as part of the *conceptual content* of the term *self-defense*, and in this, to my mind, he errs.” See Rickless, “The Nature of Self-Defense,” 342.

³³ For a conception of proportionality in defensive force that relies upon a stringency principle, see Jonathan Quong, *The Morality of Defensive Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 4. Also see, Jonathan Quong, “Proportionality, Liability, and Defensive Harm,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 43 (2015): 144-173. For a critique of this account, see Uwe Steinhoff, “Quong on Proportionality in Self-defense and the ‘Stringency Principle,’” unpublished mss., available at <https://philarchive.org/rec/UWEQOP>.

Alternatively, one could concede that the aggressor's particular threat to a stringent interest has made them liable to a greater measure of force while also believing that Innocent Victim, ultimately, ought to use less force than what is permissible to defend their vital interest in survival. In response to a case she calls "Locked in the House," in which she imagines an innocent person being morally justified in using more force to escape unjust confinement than might be used against them if they did not try to escape, a philosopher remarks: "Nevertheless, I think that victims ought to try to defend themselves with as little harm to those who are perpetrators as possible, as long as reducing the harm to the perpetrator is not likely to impose great costs on the victim."³⁴ One may draw a similar conclusion here. But whatever the case may be, the foregoing definition of ASD, which I propose on Williams's behalf, neither circumvents a philosophical debate over how to resolve the proportionately question, nor does it prejudge whether equal, greater, or lesser force is compatible with this constraint. And I take these implications to be appealing features of a definition that aims to be very general and normatively neutral.

In line with this point, Umoja's definition prejudices two more questions, which also render it less attractive than my proffered definition. The first one also pertains to the "force necessary to thwart or neutralize" an attack clause in his definition. Calling for ASD to do either of these things or to mitigate the harm that might come from an attack is, what some philosophers describe as, an "instrumentalist" account of armed self-defense.³⁵ It is certainly a matter of debate as to whether ASD – a form of resistance – needs to succeed in thwarting or neutralizing an attack to count as self-defense. It might, in some cases, only be enough to make the attack more difficult, or less likely, but not to stop it or prevent the victim from suffering harm. But this need not disqualify it as an act of self-defense.

The definition of ASD that I propose does not prejudge this question of whether a particular use of force must be sufficient to neutralize an attack or mitigate harm to count as self-defense. Indeed, in many of the cases that Williams presents, black people who took up arms in self-defense still suffered harms. But part of the thinking was that Villainous Aggressors would have to think long and hard about the risk they undertook in attacking. When black people take up arms in self-defense, says Williams, "the racist must be made to realize that in attacking us he risks his own life."³⁶ And this is a risk that cannot be taken lightly because, as he adds, "After all, his life is a white life, and he considers the white life to be superior; so why should

³⁴ F. M. Kamm, "Self-Defense, Resistance, and Suicide: The Taliban Women," in *How We Fight: Ethics in War*, ed. Helen Frowe and Gerald Lang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 75-86, 78.

³⁵ Steinhoff, "What is Self Defense?," 385. Also see, Uwe Steinhoff, *Self-Defense, Necessity, and Punishment: A Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2020), Chapter 2.

³⁶ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 116.

he risk a superior life to take an inferior one?”³⁷ However, that said, Williams certainly believed that ASD, at times, could certainly thwart some attacks and thereby mitigate serious harms. Indeed, he make this quite clear in one instance where he credits constant armed vigilance in the black community with preventing pogroms.

POGROMS: *We armed ourselves solely to defend ourselves.* And if we hadn’t been armed we would have been the victims of one of the first modern pogroms against the Afro-American.³⁸

So it is a further virtue of my proposed definition that it can account for the range of cases of ASD that Williams considers, cases which involve both successes and failures when it comes to averting attacks and mitigating harms with defensive force.

Taking instrumentalism about self-defense to be too demanding, some philosophers propose a less demanding definition by adding a subjective element. On one such account the use of force must be directed against an ongoing or imminent attack, and the defender must believe, correctly, that this is an effective form of resistance or that this use of force “belongs to an act type that usually functions as a means to resist an attack.”³⁹ Other philosophers have also appealed to subjective factors, such as belief, but have mainly taken them to be relevant in normatively evaluating defense of self and others. From this perspective, then, the distinction between objective theories and subjective ones pertains to the issue of justification. One philosopher draws the distinction as follows: “objective theories justify force based solely on the actual, external circumstances of the situation,”⁴⁰ and in contrast, “a subjective theory may or may not require that the actual, external circumstances support a justification, it will require either that the actor employing defensive force act with a certain intention, hold a particular belief, or that the threatener be at fault.”⁴¹

My definition does not add a subjective element. And I do not view this as a defect, especially if a major reason for adding such elements is to account for the moral permissibility of defensive force. As I noted earlier, my definition accepts a distinction between what counts as ASD from whether ASD is justified and aims to

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 100.

³⁹ Steinhoff, “What is Self Defense?,” 385.

⁴⁰ Russell Christopher, “Self-Defense and Defense of Others,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 123-141, 124.

⁴¹ Ibid.

be normatively neutral. So building in a subjective element to establish permissibility would be in tension with this stated aim.⁴²

I said the Umoja's definition prejudged two additional questions. The second one pertains to his reference to property. His definition of ASD calls for "the protection of life, persons, and property from aggressive assault." First, let me say that Williams clearly believes that exercising the right to armed self-defense covers not just defense of self, but that it also covers defense of others and property. So this is not in dispute. This usage clearly captures Williams's view. However, what is in dispute, is whether we must refer to property explicitly in the definition of what *counts* as armed self-defense. While I suspect that Williams may have done so himself, had he given us an explicit definition, I worry that this would perplex philosophers who find it somewhat odd to view self-defense as extending to property without further explanation.

It is a valid question to ask: Does self-defense include defense of property? And it would be preferable to have a definition that does not prejudge this and foreclose debate. Indeed, some philosophers have argued that self-defense does not include defense of property because "the *kind* of attack against which self-defensive action is taken must be restricted to threatened or actual violation of certain sort of claim, namely the kind of claim that protects interests that are tied very closely to the person—existence, integrity, and freedom."⁴³ My definition does not mention property explicitly but instead refers to "a vital interest in survival." I have yet to expand on what this means and this must await my third lecture. Suffice it to say for now that a virtue of this, more general definition, is that it leaves room for establishing with further argument that protection of property follows from this definition, along with additional assumptions about the senses of survival at issue.

Mabel Williams (Williams's wife) recalled being schooled by her father-in-law, John Williams, about the family's tradition of resisting white supremacy. "Daddy John always had a shotgun ready," she recollected, "Always the shotgun was there and it was always loaded and it was always at the door. And that was the tradition."⁴⁴ And, of course, resisting white supremacy was not merely about being prepared to meet the violence of armed white supremacists with armed defensive violence. It was, more broadly, about resisting and transforming a deep rooted system of racial domination in which whites were favored over blacks in the distribution of societal benefits and burdens across all major institutions. And it was also about transforming the consciousness of the oppressed. It might be objected that defining ASD in terms

⁴² I will revisit the role of subjective elements in Lecture III where I take up premise 2 of the survival argument.

⁴³ Rickless, "The Nature of Self-Defense," 341-342.

⁴⁴ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 57.

of defending (or even protecting) a vital interest in survival is too limiting, and perhaps too individualistic, in that it misses the role that it can play, and has played historically, in resisting and transforming an oppressive system of racial domination and liberating black consciousness.⁴⁵

Indeed, although he makes this point somewhat abstractly, Williams seemingly links defensive violence with broader social change. He remarks: “The stranglehold of oppression cannot be loosened by a plea to the oppressor’s conscience. Social change in something as fundamental as racist oppression involves violence. You cannot have progress here without violence and upheaval, because it’s struggle for survival for one and a struggle for liberation for the other.”⁴⁶ It may be that Williams has multiple routes to justifying ASD and that the respective arguments are supported by different definitions. But one of these routes is clearly the survival argument and, as I indicated, the definition I propose here is meant to cohere with this particular argument. One might think that my definition can be tweaked to accommodate this concern simply by modifying it to read “defend or advance a vital interest in survival,” but I worry that this shifts it from a narrow emphasis on purely defensive violence to a broader focus on offensive violence. And my project is specifically concerned with the former. Perhaps another way to address this worry, apart from the multiple routes to justification point, and consistent with keeping the focus on defensive violence, could be to expand on what counts as a vital interest in survival so that it covers defending life and property as well as dismantling a system of white supremacy.⁴⁷ But, as I will elaborate in a subsequent lecture, here too we must take care not to blur the distinction between defensive and offensive violence.

Perhaps the most significant points of contention in the black arms debate are over which type of violence to adopt (if one chooses to use force) and over whether to opt for nonviolence over violence as a matter of community strategy in response to the racist violence of angry mobs. Thinkers such as Malcolm X and Robert Williams worry that nonviolence is not always feasible and argue that defensive violence is sometimes required and warranted. Thinkers such as Martin Luther King Jr. worry, as we shall see in the next section, that violence, even if purely defensive, as a matter of community strategy within a civil rights demonstration is too costly, unnecessary, and futile, and that it is much too easy to cross the very thin line from purely protective violence to preemptive or even retaliatory violence.

⁴⁵ For a criticism of Umoja’s definition along these lines, see Chad Kautzer, “Notes for a Critical Theory of Community Self-Defense,” in *Setting Sights: Histories and Reflections on Community Armed Self-Defense*, ed. Scott Crow (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 39-40.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 110.

⁴⁷ I pursue this point at greater length in Lecture III.

IS ARMED SELF-DEFENSE THE ANSWER TO RACIST VIOLENCE?

Martin Luther King, Jr. emphatically denied that bearing and using arms was the answer to racist violence. Yet he understood the impulse to take up arms in self-defense. Indeed – albeit unsuccessfully – he once acted upon this impulse. On the urging of a close advisor, who worried about looming threats of racist violence against him and his family, King once applied for and was denied a permit to carry a concealed gun in his vehicle. And we also know that King utilized armed guards in his home for “defensive precautions.”⁴⁸ So it is quite clear that he appreciated the appeal of guns for *individual* defense of self, family, and property.

The crucial point of contention between King and Williams, then, was on the question of whether blacks should socially organize *collective* armed resistance to racist violence as a matter of group strategy. Recounting an early incident of black armed resistance in Monroe, North Carolina, to prevent defilement of a black soldier’s corpse by the Ku Klux Klan, Williams remembered this as an eye opening moment, which, as he put it, “really started us to understanding that we had to resist, and that resistance could be effective if we resisted in groups, and if we resisted with guns.”⁴⁹ King took issue with this sentiment. He argues that black armed resistance is not the answer to racist violence because it is costly, unnecessary, and futile. This section discusses his first two concerns along with Williams’s responses to them and to the lead question.

King observes, in 1959, that frustration with progress in the black quest for genuine citizenship produces two types of collective reactions: *peaceful resistance* and *violent retaliation*. Disciples of the former were committed to social organization and using nonviolent measures to resist those standing in the way of racial progress and civil rights. Proponents of the latter, in contrast, relied upon socially organized violence to avenge racial wrongs and black suffering in the first instance, and only secondarily to achieve progress.⁵⁰ King believed that some proponents of taking up arms including members of the Black Power movement shared this “anger-motivated” commitment to violent armed resistance for revenge.⁵¹ Perhaps realizing that this could be an uncharitable characterization of the

⁴⁸ Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (New York: Prometheus, 2014), 262-263.

⁴⁹ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 50.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 12.

⁵¹ On philosophical accounts that impose an intent condition on justifiable self-defense having the wrong motive – as one’s primary intention – could impugn the morally permissibility of such resistance. See, e.g., Shannon Brandt Ford, “Rights-Based Justifications for Self-Defense: Defending a Modified Unjust Threat Account,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36 (2022): 49-65.

motives of others like Williams, King offers further classification that facilitates raising more pointed concerns about armed self-defense.

He identifies three approaches to violence: pure nonviolence, defensive violence, and strategic violence.⁵² King is likely imagining cases in which people are engaging in peaceful protest or civil disobedience, as was the case, for instance, during the Montgomery bus boycott in Selma, Alabama, and are being confronted by violent and armed assailants who oppose them and their just causes. In other words, in step with Williams, King is contemplating cases involving “Villainous Aggressors.”⁵³ *Pure nonviolence* (NV) prepares people to handle these violent attacks so that they can endure some evil for the sake of conquering a greater one and, says King, this path is not for the weak because it takes extraordinary discipline and courage.

He realizes that this response to violence is very difficult to sell to the black masses, especially when they are being besieged by brutally violent racists, still he insists that NV is superior to the other alternatives. A King aide reportedly had this to say: “Nonviolence as a way of life was just as foreign to blacks as flying a space capsule would be to a roach.”⁵⁴ And other civil rights activists including James Farmer who, like King, was a strong advocate of nonviolent mass civil rights struggle, also appreciated the uphill battle they faced convincing a skeptical black public. Farmer documents this representative black reaction to calls for nonviolence: “You mean that if someone hits you, you’re not going to hit back? What are you, some kind of nut or something?”⁵⁵ So anticipating the accusation of being uncharitable in understanding why some blacks called for taking up arms against racist violence, King further distinguishes between two types of violent responses.

Defensive violence (DV) involves using an instrument of force to protect one’s person, other persons, and property. It is, says King, exercising violence in self-defense. He concedes that this type of violence has widespread appeal, is generally sanctioned by law and morals, and is even condoned, under certain circumstances, by advocates of NV such as Gandhi. *Strategic violence* (SV), on the other hand, involves a deliberate use of instruments of force, organized akin to warfare, to pursue justice, equality, freedom or to resist racial oppression and white supremacy. Presumably, this is always condemned by advocates of NV.

Putting human life at risk is among the perils of SV. Persons engaging in such violence can perish and so can those who are its targets. King believed that the black

⁵² Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 12-13.

⁵³ Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Self-Defense,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 283-310.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Simon Wendt, “‘Urge People Not to Carry Guns’: Armed Self-Defense in the Louisiana Civil Rights Movement and the Radicalization of the Congress of Racial Equality,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 45 (2004): 261-286, 267.

⁵⁵ James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 109. Also quoted in Wendt, “Urge People Not to Carry Guns,” 265.

struggle for freedom could not be won by blacks alone. They needed sympathetic white allies willing to struggle with them in some cases, and unwilling to oppose them in others. But, just as important, blacks also needed to ensure that selected strategies of struggle did not alienate members of their own racial group. So, he worried that calls for SV would dissuade many blacks from joining the movement. And because King placed so much importance on building a mass movement for rights and freedom, it is not surprising that he identifies a failure to attract sufficient numbers of blacks, and members of a “large uncommitted middle group,” to the collective struggle as the greatest danger of SV.⁵⁶

To these considerable costs – putting life at risk and alienating allies – he adds two more concerns, namely, that calls for SV may mislead blacks into thinking that violent resistance is the *only* path to freedom, and that such resistance may risk drawing them into a form of combat with an adversary that has them out-manned and out-gunned thereby dooming them from the start. King believed, therefore, that SV was unnecessary and futile, in addition to being too costly. This worry about the futility of SV, which he also raises in connection with DV, is significant. And I shall address it at length, along with a way that Williams can respond, in my second lecture.

Scholars have studied what some may describe as the “radicalization” of civil rights organizations during the tumultuous 1960s. This radical turn can be linked to shifting strategies and philosophies regarding how best to pursue civil rights, human rights, and other rights, which assign armed resistance a more prominent place in the struggle.⁵⁷ Writing during this period, King made a similar observation, noting that some devotees of Black Power were increasingly attracted to retaliatory violence (a form of strategic violence).⁵⁸ And in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, King further develops his concerns about costliness, necessity, and futility.

While the main focus of his critique is SV, King argues that DV is susceptible to comparable concerns. In addition to putting human life at risk, though perhaps to a lesser extent, DV also seems equally unnecessary, says King, because it is not the only path to achieve desired civil rights goals.⁵⁹ He allows that DV may, in the best

⁵⁶ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 13.

⁵⁷ Akinyele O. Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1999): 558-578.

⁵⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 56.

⁵⁹ King’s concern about DV may cut deeper. It could turn out that DV, in some instances, only yields a marginal gain in preserving human life, or at worst no gain at all. This becomes a concern if there are defensive escalations, where what starts out as minor defensive violence quickly escalates into major and more aggressive violence. For an analysis of such cases, see Gerald Lang,

case scenario, be able to win over prospective allies who see defensive resistance as virtuous. Persons engaged in DV may rightly be viewed as manifesting the virtues of courage and self-respect, which could attract more allies to the collective struggle. However, King argues that it would remain a questionable strategy within the context of a civil rights movement. He worries that while DV is a less objectionable option than SV because the line between it and SV (which is more aggressive in nature) is so thin, it is too easy for DV to be perceived as aggressive violence and to invite aggression in return.⁶⁰ And this likely outcome will, inevitably, compromise the overall effectiveness of the freedom struggle making it an ill-advised collective strategy.⁶¹

Lastly, to complete King's case for why armed self-defense or any type of defensive violence is not the answer to violent racism, we must consider the normative principle supporting his targeted critique of DV. It comes to light in the Black Power chapter. Here he argues that DV contravenes this principle. King registers the distinction between calls for aggressive violence, which he takes to be clearly objectionable, and for defensive violence, which he describes as a "false issue" raised by critics of NV.⁶² And he makes the point that there is a normatively significant difference between exercising self-defense (armed or otherwise) outside of a civil rights demonstration and doing so within one.⁶³ DV is, on his view, morally impermissible during civil rights demonstrations. King bases this on the principle that it is better to endure a lesser evil for the sake of eradicating a greater one. I shall call this the *Principle of Lesser Evil* (POLE).

He reasons as follows. The point of civil rights demonstrations is, generally speaking, to achieve a just cause such as ending school segregation based on race. And while there will be Villainous Aggressors who resist and resort to unlawful violence, causing wrongful harm, demonstrators ought not respond to these attacks with defensive violence. Doing so will hinder the realization of the just cause, presumably for reasons pertaining to his aforementioned worry about pushing away

"Defensive Escalations," *The Journal of Ethics* 26 (2022): 273-294. One could, of course, argue, as Lang does, that such escalations may be justified in certain circumstances. But this is still grist for King's mill because the point is that violent responses, whether strategic or defensive, put human life at risk. And if the very real possibility of defensive escalations narrows the loss-of-life gap between SV and DV then so much the worse for the latter.

⁶⁰ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 57-58.

⁶¹ This "thin line" argument bridges King's concerns about necessity and futility. When I take up the latter, in Lecture II, I shall make the point that even if ASD is doomed to fail it could still be necessary.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶³ James Farmer also distinguished between ASD outside of the movement and within it to dispel the appearance of inconsistency with his openness to DV for self-defense. See Wendt, "Urge People Not to Carry Guns," 280.

potential allies in eradicating the greater evil. To be sure, those under attack (Innocent Victims) have an interest in not being assaulted, not being hit by rocks as they peacefully march for school desegregation, but their interest must be assigned a lower priority in such circumstances. “It is better to shed a little blood from a blow on the head or a rock thrown by an angry mob,” says King, “than to have children by the thousands finishing high school who can only read at a sixth-grade level.”⁶⁴ By similar reasoning, he might also say that it is better to shed a little blood from a gunshot wound from the gun of a Villainous Aggressor than to have this same outcome. These conclusions follow from POLE.

King presents a powerful case for why, on his view, armed self-defense or any type of defensive violence is not the answer to the racist violence of Villainous Aggressors. He argues that it is costly, unnecessary, futile and that it contravenes a weighty normative principle. How might Williams respond to these concerns? Let us start with the last claim. In my second lecture, when we consider the futility objection in greater detail, I will identify a competing normative principle, which supports drawing different conclusions from King’s example. In the meantime, let me make two small points about the foregoing argument.

First, his reasoning assumes that the interest Innocent Victims have in not being assaulted must be assigned a lower priority. But we could dispute this. Indeed, philosophers have argued that the justification for self-defense rests upon a defender being entitled to assign grave weight to their interest in self-defense. If we view the right to self-defense as an act-specific agent-relative prerogative, which allows a defender to assign proportionately greater weight to their interest in self-defense, than would otherwise be warranted by an impersonal standard, then King’s assumption can be rejected.⁶⁵ And, second, even if we agree that Innocent Victim’s interest should be assigned a lower priority, this does not rule out resorting to defensive violence. But here we might accommodate King’s point by imposing a further normative constraint on the violence. For instance, we can proscribe that the defender where possible, without risking undue costs on self or others, aim to inflict as little harm as possible to the Villainous Aggressor.⁶⁶

King’s concerns about DV being unnecessary and costly can be connected, as Williams’s response shows. Necessity is a condition of justified self-defense, according to philosophical orthodoxy. Williams take this for granted and presumes that this also applies to armed self-defense. With this starting point, the main burden of his survival argument is to elaborate on when, and under what conditions, ASD is

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Uwe Steinhoff, “Self-Defense as Claim Right, Liberty, and Act-Specific Agent-Relative Prerogative,” *Law and Philosophy* 35 (2016): 193-209, 207-209.

⁶⁶ Kamm, “Self-Defense, Resistance, and Suicide: The Taliban Women.”

necessary. King does not appear to dispute this necessity premise, though he clearly denies that defensive violence is necessary. However, when King raises the issue of necessity, he is, at least in the first instance, asking whether there is an alternative to defensive violence and taking issue with Williams on this point. “Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no collective and practical alternative,” says King, “[Williams] argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms.”⁶⁷ Because King believes that NV is such an alternative, one that is both meaningful and attractive, King concludes that defensive violence is unnecessary. He supports this point by citing cases of nonviolent demonstrations in America that succeeded at realizing important civil rights goals. And alongside this he considers India’s success, through Gandhi’s leadership, in combating colonialism with nonviolence.

But King’s case is misleading. Williams does not embrace a false dichotomy. And he offers two lines of response. The first one relies upon a different gloss on the issue of necessity. Williams agrees with King that defensive violence is not the only path. There are clearly other options apart from complete submission including, as King insists, NV. However, assuming that these options for responding to racist violence have different costs and benefits, Williams surmises that the more precise question is whether NV is, on balance, a less costly alternative to DV. And he thinks that this is not obviously the case while King disagrees. So, this is the real question at issue according to Williams. And I am inclined to agree.

I said that Williams had two avenues of response to the issue of necessity raised by King. The first, which we just considered, had to do with reframing the real question at issue as one having to do with the relative costs of available options rather than with the mere existence of options. The second turns on stressing the importance of distinguishing between circumstances that are more or less ideal when deciding about the necessity of armed self-defense. I will develop this response more fully in my third lecture. Suffice it to say for now, with respect to the lead question of this section, the basic point is this: while armed self-defense may be a less necessary option under more ideal circumstances, when blacks can count on law to protect them from Villainous Aggressors, in a less ideal world where this is not the case – and the law of the jungle prevails putting black survival at stake – the strategy of responding to racist violence must be more flexible, and armed self-defense, while not *the* answer must certainly be part of an overall response to racist violence.⁶⁸

I read Williams as identifying some of the costs of nonviolence and some of the benefits of defensive violence. And I will say more about both in my subsequent lectures. But before concluding this one, let me identify what Williams takes to be

⁶⁷ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

an especially serious cost of King's nonviolent alternative, and – on the other side of the coin – a particularly attractive benefit of armed self-defense.

(UN)DIGNIFIED RESISTANCE

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, and during the dawn of the twentieth, pogroms carried out against Jews in Imperial Russian were, on one account, about “deriding, scaring and humiliating the other.”⁶⁹ And the wholesale destruction of their homes, neighborhoods, and brutal assaults against their persons was partly about expressing that Jews were inferior and, perhaps, getting them to view themselves as such. So, on this analysis, physical violence perpetrated against Jews was used to humiliate and convey a serious message of “Jewish weakness and inferiority.”⁷⁰ Anti-Jewish Russian pogroms evolved from being less to more lethal, and from being less to more a function of state involvement, but the general goals were the same: to express and reinforce their presumed subordinate status through degradation and humiliation.

After an especially lethal pogrom took place in Kishinev, the capital of Bessarabia, in 1903, which garnered significant international attention, some Jews reacted to the pogrom with indignation toward fellow Jews who choose to endure rather than resist the violence.⁷¹ For instance, several prominent Jewish writers, who condemned Jewish passivity and inaction in a co-authored pamphlet, drew this provocative conclusion: “The evil in Kishinev was not that a few dozen Jews fell [...] but that only two in the enemy camp were killed. [...] That is shameful, terrible.”⁷² Others, at the time, also embraced and encouraged this call for Jews to take up dignified resistance with armed defensive violence, if necessary, including one intellectual who cited a folk song to make the point:

If someone insults you, my son
With spittle
Then respond with self-dignity:
Spit back with bullets.⁷³

Robert Williams, as we observed earlier, believed that black armed self-defense in his community of Monroe, North Carolina, was instrumental in preventing one of

⁶⁹ Stefan Wiese, “‘Spit Back with Bullets!’ Emotions in Russia’s Jewish Pogroms, 1881-1905,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 39 (2013): 472-501, 473.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 480.

⁷¹ Ibid., 488.

⁷² Ibid., 489.

⁷³ Ibid.

the first modern pogroms against blacks in America. Whether it was is, of course, subject to debate. Nevertheless, the point to be made, in this section, is that armed self-defense, as the Kishinev case makes clear, can be viewed as an instance of dignified resistance to racist violence that aims to degrade and humiliate its victims.⁷⁴ Furthermore, contrary to what Martin Luther King Jr. and other proponents of nonviolence believed, turning the other cheek, even within a civil rights demonstration, could be construed as undignified resistance.

If one supposes, as King did, that “[t]he tragedy of slavery and segregation is that they instilled in the Negro a disastrous sense of his own worthlessness,”⁷⁵ then an avenue opens to defend nonviolence on moral grounds. One can, for example, appeal to the normative value of dignity. Indeed, as one political theorist has argued, we can interpret King as viewing nonviolent resistance as a way for blacks to regain dignity and self-respect and thereby overcome a sense of worthlessness or being less than human.⁷⁶ This potential to transform the heart and soul of practitioners of nonviolent direct action, elevating their sense of dignity and self-worth was, for King, a singular accomplishment of the civil rights movement. And, as it has been noted, the Montgomery bus boycott and other examples of mass nonviolent resistance at the time are, from this perspective, paradigm illustrations of dignified resistance.⁷⁷

Elsewhere I address the importance of dignity in King’s political thought about voting rights. For King, when we are pursuing justice, it is imperative that we should conduct ourselves in a dignified way. And he cites, as an example of dignified conduct, Amelia Boynton Robinson who gave blood offerings as she, along with others, endured the vicious brutality of violent racists, as she tried to vote and as she marched for voting rights. I make the following observation about this case:

Had Robinson armed herself not with the method of non-violence and the Christian weapon of love but with a firearm and the method of fighting brutal violence with the same kind of violence, and defended

⁷⁴ In my third lecture, I will suggest that Williams’s concern about survival extends to a symbolic concern with being treated with dignity and so when our dignity is at stake armed defensive force that might otherwise be deemed unjustified based on proportionately considerations might be permissible (ref. SBF). Here I am suggesting that passively enduring assaults on dignity, according to Williams, must be considered among the costs of nonviolence, and resisting this should be considered among the benefits of armed self-defense.

⁷⁵ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 130.

⁷⁶ Karuna Mantena, “Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2018), 85.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

herself, accordingly, King would have strongly disapproved. This would not have been an example of moving with dignity.⁷⁸

However, while King may have believed that “dignity was demonstrated in the willingness to suffer violence without retaliation,”⁷⁹ as sympathetic yet critical readers of King acknowledge, others including proponents of Black Power “were concerned that nonviolent displays of black suffering and self-restraint, especially when undertaken to appeal to the dominant white majority, were too apt to signal weakness, even humiliation.”⁸⁰ Thus, there was disagreement about how to understand dignified resistance. And having influenced Malcolm X as well as Black Power advocates, Williams certainly shared this view, and demurred that suffering racist violence without an effort to defend was undignified, perhaps even slavish.

There was an intermingling of Christianity and nonviolent direct action during the Civil Rights movement, particularly given the central role that black Christians, like King, played as movement leaders and as rank-and-file members. A philosophical ideal linking the two was that of turning-the-other cheek and meeting hatred with agape love. King famously preached the importance of exercising this virtue within civil rights demonstrations. Lamenting the constant call (coming from white liberals as well as elite black leaders) for blacks to be nonviolent, Williams implicitly condemned this ideal as a legacy of slavishness that was part of the submissive “pie-in-the-sky after-you-die form of Christianity,” used to indoctrinate slaves and keep them submissive.⁸¹ However, it is one thing to claim nonviolence is an instance of undignified resistance and another thing to claim that it is slavish. And one could argue that the latter description, when applied to what some consider heroic civil rights crusaders such as Robinson, may be a step too far.

To make this point, consider a distinction one philosopher draws between “genuine slaves” and slaves “free in fact.”⁸² A hallmark of slavishness, which we find in genuine slaves, is that their obedience to the master is either rooted in fear or in taking the master’s wishes for them to act (or refrain from acting) to be sufficient reason for doing so. In contrast, one who is a slave in form, subject to obey the master, but not a slave in fact is motivated either by morality or rationality. Those

⁷⁸ Derrick Darby, *A Realistic Blacktopia: Why We Must Unite to Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 219.

⁷⁹ Mantena, “Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics,” 87.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 113.

⁸² Bernard R. Boxill, “The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2018), 70.

who are slaves, but “free in fact,” choose to act or not because it is thought to be the right thing to do, or because after weighing the various costs and benefits one decides that it is the best or most rational course of action. While both types of slaves may be viewed as submissive, insofar as they ultimately submit to the will of the master, only the former can be described as slavish. Of course, during the time of black chattel slavery in the United States, slaves who were free in fact could, and often were, broken using cruel methods of torture by plantation overseers.

Yet this case suggests a different reading of Robinson’s submitting to racist violence with nonviolent resistance. While it is tempting to describe turning the other cheek as slavishness we must probe the deeper reasons for the overt act of submissiveness. And if we find, as King and others would no doubt argue, that persons who submit to the discipline of nonviolent resistance do so by making a difficult choice, but only after embracing the morality or rationality of the choice, then it would be inaccurate to describe acts of nonviolent resistance as slavish.⁸³ However, the question of how to understand dignified resistance remains open. And, on this point, Williams and King certainly did not see eye-to-eye.

For those like Williams who thought that ASD was a form of dignified resistance, and that nonviolent resistance was not, a further point could be made against King. One might accuse King of discounting the possibility that gaining allies may turn on getting them to believe that they can pursue collective struggle without loss of dignity, and for some this may mean taking up arms for defensive purposes.⁸⁴ And these prospective allies may not insist that the marchers themselves be armed, but only that they be supported, when necessary, by others bearing arms for defensive purposes. Thus, from this point of view, ASD is not only justified for personal defense, but it is also justified *within* movement activity such as a protest march due, in part, to the vital importance of affirming our dignity and facilitating dignified conduct. Of course, there may be weighty pragmatic or perhaps countervailing moral reasons for not exercising ASD within movement activity.

This appeal to dignity offers yet another way to respond to King’s argument for why armed self-defense is not the answer to racist violence. Williams might add that the bloody physical assaults – from fists, rocks, or gunshots – are not the only relevant evils at issue *contra* King. Also at issue are the assaults on dignity.

⁸³ Although I will not pursue this point, this matter of slavishness might be adapted to support not only more forceful defensive resistance as Boxill illustrates, but also collective armed self-defense. One may need to supply evidence to oneself and to others that one is not in fact slavish though one may appear to be so insofar as one chooses to comply with those who threatened violence.

⁸⁴ For more thought on a *prima facie* right to resist with dignity, and taking armed self-defense to be a dignified method of resistance, see Dan Demetriou, “Defense with Dignity: How the Dignity of Violent Resistance Informs the Gun Rights Debate,” *Philosophical Studies* 179 (2022): 3653-3670.

According to Williams, what makes black “militants” worthy of this description is precisely that they are prepared to resist a racist system, and the Villainous Aggressors that it sanctions, by defending themselves, their families, their homes, and their dignity.⁸⁵ To be sure, black militants, as Williams sees them, endorse and even utilize nonviolent tactics, though they are realistic about their limits. And concern with human dignity marks a crucial limit of nonviolent tactics.

DIGNITY: But we also believe that a man cannot have human dignity if he allows himself to be abused; to be kicked and beaten to the ground, to allow his wife and children to be attacked, refusing to defend them and himself on the basis that he’s so pious, so self-righteous, that it would demean his personality if he fought back.⁸⁶

So, we can accept King’s general argument, and even agree with POLE, yet disagree about the range of evils at issue and how to weigh them. Indeed, for some people, including Williams, loss of dignity or having one’s dignity compromised, may be deemed an evil equal to or even greater than loss of blood from physical assaults.

Of course, settling the debate between King and Williams is not simply about tallying the costs of nonviolence and defensive violence; we must consider the benefits too. The resolution of the issue for King, as I have suggested here, largely turns on what it takes to build a successful coalition for civil rights. And he argues that we jeopardize this with ASD. Williams’s worries about compromising dignity, and losing potential allies, on account of eschewing ASD offer a counterpoint. He advances his case by detailing additional concrete benefits, apart from expressing dignified resistance, of exercising the right to armed self-defense. And these will be considered in the next lecture.

CONCLUSION

Williams assumes that there is a right to armed self-defense. Furthermore, he assumes that this right is triggered when the law of the jungle prevails and government fails to protect. Under these nonideal circumstances it becomes necessary to exercise this right. King resists this by pointing out the futility of taking up arms. “In a violent racial situation,” says King, “the power structure has the local police, the state troopers, the national guard and finally the army to call on, all of which are predominately white.”⁸⁷ Thus, any effort by blacks to take up arms either

⁸⁵ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 114.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 121.

⁸⁷ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 60.

for strategic violence or defensive violence is bound to fail. Taking up this futility objection, advancing an analysis of the right to armed self-defense that fruitfully captures Williams's view, and explaining how this right extends to defense of others and, somewhat more controversially, to property are the main tasks for my next lecture.